



*Office of the United States Attorney  
District of Arizona*  
**José de Jesus Rivera**

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## **PRESS RELEASE**

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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
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### **Man Sentenced to Prison Term for Selling Fake Moon Rocks**

**PHOENIX, ARIZONA** -- A man who bilked investors out of thousands of dollars by selling “lunar samples” he fraudulently claimed were gathered from the surface of the moon by astronauts Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin during their historic Apollo 11 mission of July, 1969, was sentenced to federal prison today.

José de Jesus Rivera, United States Attorney for the District of Arizona, announced today that RICHARD KEITH MOUNTAIN, age 53, of New Milford, Connecticut, was sentenced to 21 months in federal prison by United States District Judge Roslyn O. Silver, in Phoenix, Arizona. Mountain pled guilty on October 30, 2000, to six counts of mail and wire fraud in connection with a scheme to sell “moon rocks” he claimed to have been scientifically proven to be of lunar origin.

Mountain was originally arrested in Connecticut on June 15, 1999, on charges contained in a 24-count sealed federal indictment accusing him with twelve counts of Mail Fraud, in violation of Title 18, United States Code, Section 1341, and twelve counts of Wire Fraud, in violation of Title 18, United States Code, Section 1343. He was released on a \$100,000.00 bond, but was arrested again on September 8, 2000, by Royal Canadian Mounted Police near Vancouver, British Columbia, after he sold counterfeit limited-edition signed prints of Apollo astronauts on behalf of a non-existent Canadian charitable organization. After

pleading guilty to Canadian fraud charges, he was delivered to the custody of U.S. Marshals to stand trial on the Arizona charges.

The current indictment, returned by a federal grand jury on April 29, 1999, alleged that in 1996, Mountain, using the alias “Nicholas Parker Cole”, owned and operated several businesses in Arizona and California engaged in the marketing of artwork and other collectibles relating to the manned exploration of space. Mountain used these businesses and others to identify, seek out, and solicit prospective buyers to purchase granules of material represented by Mountain to have been collected from the surface of the moon by astronauts Neil A. Armstrong and Edwin E. “Buzz” Aldrin, Jr., during the Apollo 11 lunar landing of July 20, 1969.

To support this scheme, Mountain represented to prospective buyers that the purported lunar soil samples were transported along with other lunar material from the moon to the Earth aboard Apollo 11, then subsequently delivered by astronauts Armstrong, Aldrin, and Michael Collins to officials representing the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (“NASA”, hereafter) for processing and analysis.

Mountain falsely represented to prospective buyers that the owner of this material (who had allegedly acquired the material from former officials of the Italian government) personally delivered the samples to Mountain for sale in the United States and elsewhere. Mountain created and otherwise obtained false documents purporting to substantiate the source and authenticity of the samples. In this regard, Mountain falsely represented that astronaut Edwin E. “Buzz” Aldrin personally verified the authenticity of the samples and had executed an affidavit to that effect. Mountain also falsely represented to victims that the authenticity of the granules had been verified by officials associated with agencies of the United States, and then enlisted the assistance of other individuals to prepare and provide verifications and affidavits falsely attesting to the authenticity of the granules. Mountain also offered to pay an individual associated with the Jet Propulsion Laboratory the sum of \$10,000.00 to falsely declare that the samples were genuine.

To further support this scheme, Mountain provided to prospective buyers copies of reports of chemical analysis which falsely and fraudulently attested to the authenticity and lunar origin of the granules. He also provided false and misleading information and documentation to otherwise legitimate appraisers in order to obtain from those appraisers certified appraisals which inaccurately attested to the authenticity and value of the purported lunar samples. He then provided to prospective buyers copies of these appraisals which inaccurately established a value for the samples far in excess of the price quoted by Mountain for the sale of those samples. The Lunar Receiving Laboratory at the Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas, conducted a comprehensive analysis of the material and confirmed that the sand-like granules sold by Mountain were not of lunar origin.

In September, 1997, using the alias "Nicholas Cole", Mountain placed an advertisement in the Arizona Republic newspaper offering for public sale a limited quantity of the soil samples. From his home in San Diego, California, Mountain used interstate telephone and wire services to contact potential buyers and to solicit sales of the material. Mountain also used the United States Postal Service and commercial interstate carriers, including Federal Express, to contact and communicate with prospective buyers for purposes of inducing them to purchase the fake lunar material. These potential buyers were located throughout the United States, Australia and Canada.

As a result of this scheme, Mountain received more than \$98,750.00 from investors for the purchase of the purported lunar samples. Mountain sold individual samples - each the size of a grain of sand - for \$6,000.00 to \$15,000.00 dollars apiece. Judge Silver ordered that Mountain repay the victims for their purchases as part of his sentence. Mountain was also ordered to serve three years on Supervised Release upon his release from prison.

The investigation was conducted by agents from the NASA Office of Inspector General in California and Texas and the Phoenix Office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The prosecution was conducted by Assistant United States Attorney Michael Shelby, District of Arizona.

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